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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABIDJAN 000906

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DEPT FOR PRM/AFR/CACHANG
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SUBJECT: HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL FOR LIBERIAN REFUGEES IN
GUIGLO

REF: A. ABIDJAN 723

[1B](#). ABIDJAN 885

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Classified By: REFCOORD NICHOLAS HILGERT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[11](#). (U) Summary: Abidjan-based Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) visited Guiglo from August 1-3 to meet with UNHCR field representatives and visit the Nicla Refugee Camp for Liberian refugees. There are approximately 10,500 Liberian refugees in the northern Refugee Welcome Zone (ZAR), of which 5,987, or 57%, are in the Nicla camp. Many refugees in Nicla still have pending U.S. resettlement cases. Saber Azam, UNHCR Representative, told RefCoord he is outlining a strategy to close Guiglo in 2006 and said he supported an OPE visit in the near future to clear out pending resettlement cases. OPE should consult closely with UNHCR regarding the timing of any future visits. End Summary.

[12](#). (U) Abidjan-based Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) visited Guiglo from August 1-3 to meet with UNHCR field representatives and visit the Nicla Refugee Camp for Liberian refugees. RefCoord also met with a group of Liberian refugees in Guiglo town and visited the internally displaced persons' (IDP) camp with USAID/OFDA Principal Regional Representative Regina Davis on August 3. A report on the IDP camp visit will be sent separately.

UNHCR Figures on Liberian Refugees

[13](#). (U) Zeidane Ould, Head of Office for UNHCR Guiglo, informed RefCoord that there are approximately 10,500 Liberian refugees in the northern Refugee Welcome Zone (ZAR), of which 5,987, or 57%, are in the Nicla camp (UNHCR estimates there are approximately 38,000 Liberian refugees in Cote d'Ivoire, mostly integrated in local villages). This is an increase from 2005 when the Nicla refugees represented only around 38% of the refugee population in the same region. The majority of the remaining Liberian refugees are in the southern ZAR, the region around Tabou, in southwest Cote d'Ivoire. The Nicla refugees are mostly ethnic Krahn (74%) and originate from Grand Gedeh County in Liberia. A further 1,348 Liberian refugees live in Guiglo town, just 7km from Nicla camp. Nicla is the only remaining refugee camp in Cote d'Ivoire (ref. A). The other main concentration of Liberian

refugees in the northern ZAR is in Danane (1,523), west of Guiglo near the Guinean border.

¶4. (U) UNHCR Guiglo assisted the voluntary return of just over 6,100 refugees to Liberia from the northern ZAR in 2005, approximately 120 of whom came from the Nicla camp. UNHCR has only assisted 181 refugees to return from this region in ¶2006. Slightly more women than men are returning from the northern ZAR. In 2005 the gender balance was 57% female and 43% male for the region. Currently it is 55% female and 45% male. The ratio in Nicla camp has not changed from 2005 (54% female to 46% male).

¶5. (U) UNHCR faces several challenges in the northern ZAR, not the least of which was the destruction of their property in Guiglo in January during anti-UN rioting, and the subsequent evacuation of their staff for several weeks from the area. UNHCR is currently running their operations out of the former guest-house in Guiglo. Local staff are based in Guiglo town and Zeidane must return to Duekoue each night (thirty minutes away) per UN security restrictions on international staff. Other challenges include poor road conditions on transportation routes to Liberia. A final, and perhaps greater issue for the Nicla refugees, is their continued hope for resettlement to the United States.

Resettlement from Cote d'Ivoire

¶6. (U) The United States resettled some 7,000 Liberian refugees from Cote d'Ivoire over the last several years. According to UNHCR, some 4,000 were resettled directly from Nicla camp. Last summer, a final group of refugees was interviewed in Abidjan for resettlement. Many were refused and returned to Nicla, but others returned holding papers that indicated their cases are on hold pending further information. According to Zeidane, refugees often open their meetings with UNHCR with a group prayer and call on God to

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help them resettle to the U.S. The refugees in Nicla point to the ongoing crisis in Cote d'Ivoire as proof that they are in imminent danger and have stated their refusal to return to Liberia. At the same time, Nicla refugees have also enjoyed significant health, food distribution, education, and vocational training benefits up to now, benefits that their fellow Liberians just down the road in Guiglo and in the surrounding villages do not receive.

Nicla: A Colorful Past

¶7. (C) Since the beginning of the Liberian conflict, refugees in Cote d'Ivoire were welcomed into local villages where, in most cases, they shared common ethnic ties with the Ivoirian community. The government established a refugee welcome zone (ZAR) which stretched from Tabou in the southwest, all the way along the Liberian border to Danane. However, in 1995 Ivoirian residents in the Tai region, north of Tabou, forced Liberian refugees from their villages after many were implicated in violence on both sides of the border.

The refugees from this area moved north to Guiglo, where UNHCR agreed to open the Nicla camp just outside of town in order to provide security and other assistance to the refugees. According to UNHCR, local militia groups recruited refugees in Nicla in 2002 to help counter a rebel offensive in the area. The camp was once again the focus of rumored recruitment in 2004, but has largely retained its civil character.

¶8. (C) UNHCR reports regular tensions and occasional threats to its personnel from refugees in the camp. UNHCR staff in Guiglo said the refugees have thrown stones at the Representative's car in the past and some staff said they believe many in the camp are former combatants in Liberia, but offered no proof of this charge to RefCoord. Although

the current security situation in Guiglo remains in flux as the UN and Ivoirian authorities try to push forward on the dismantlement process for local militias (ref. B), there is no obvious or immediate threat to the refugees from the local population.

¶9. (U) However, UNHCR is not taking any chances and has reopened discussions with the ONUCI Benin Battalion forces that have redeployed to Guiglo after the departure of the Bangladeshi forces in January to establish a contingency plan in case of a generalized outbreak of fighting in the region. RefCoord noted during his trip to Guiglo that the new ONUCI base is located on the dirt road leading to the Nicla camp, just off the main route into Guiglo. This base also happens to be located directly across from the internally displaced persons (IDP) camp managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

RefCoord Meeting with Nicla Refugees

¶10. (U) RefCoord met with the Nicla Refugee Committee (LRRC) and with a larger audience of 200-300 refugees on August 2. RefCoord was greeted upon arrival by about 10 women holding picket signs stating, "Repatriation Never, Evacuation Ever!" and other similar slogans. In both meetings RefCoord stressed that the U.S. group resettlement program for Liberian refugees had ended, and that those refugees expecting a new mission to identify candidates for resettlement should instead focus their attention on return to Liberia or local integration in Cote d'Ivoire. RefCoord highlighted the significant disparity in refugee assistance in host countries compared to Liberia, and explained that assistance outside Liberia would continue to decline in 2007.

In both meetings the LRRC Chairman said that the Nicla refugees would stick together as a group, and that they accepted the U.S. decision to "abandon" them now. He stated that the majority of the Nicla refugees are ethnic Mandingo and Krahn, had supported Doe during the war, and are targeted in Liberia. He said that Mandingo are being "massacred" in Nimba County and that the current President in Liberia is not allowing Mandingos into the government.

¶11. (U) RefCoord stated that there are no current reports of returnees being targeted for persecution in Liberia, much less massacred, and encouraged the refugees to focus on inclusive dialogue that did not divide Liberians from each

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other. RefCoord also explained that Mandingo from other host countries are returning to Liberia and that UNHCR is reporting an 80% success rate in settling property claims for all returnees. (Note: According to UNHCR Nzerekore in Guinea, of the some 23,000 ethnic Mandingo in the refugee camps there at the beginning of 2006, more than 12,000 have already returned to Liberia this year. End note.) Still, RefCoord stressed that return to Liberia is a voluntary decision and that those Liberians who did not wish to return would not be forced to do so. RefCoord pointed out that U.S. assistance in Cote d'Ivoire also supports integration in the local villages and that UNHCR plans to make local integration a key component of their repatriation planning through 2007. RefCoord also recognized in the audience at least two refugees formerly residing in the recently closed Tabou Transit Center (TC).

Pending Resettlement Cases

¶12. (U) After the meeting RefCoord walked through the camp with a group of refugees. Many of them showed RefCoord forms from DHS dating back to September 2005 requesting more information before completing their files. Other refugees showed forms indicating a finding of ineligibility for various reasons, including misrepresentation, fraud, and alien smuggling. Some refugees even had papers showing

refusal of an appeal of ineligibility. RefCoord explained that the United States would process all eligible family reunion files still open or submitted before September 30, but that for those refugees holding ineligibilities, or with otherwise closed cases, they needed to focus on whether or not they intended to return to Liberia or stay in Cote d'Ivoire, not resettlement to the United States. It is clear, however, that many refugees are simply not able to read or understand the finely worded explanations of the decisions on their cases.

UNHCR's Plans

¶13. (U) Saber Azam, UNHCR Representative, reiterated to RefCoord on August 9 UNHCR's plans to close the Nicla camp by the end of 2006, although he stressed that the Nicla camp would not be demolished as was the case with the TC in Tabou, but probably "converted" into an Ivoirian village, which it already resembles. In this regard UNHCR will work out a closure strategy with the Prefect in Guiglo. He believes the majority of the refugees who will choose to remain in Cote d'Ivoire arrived in 1990 and are already more or less self-sufficient. Azam said he wants to reinvigorate UNHCR's tripartite agreement with Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia, bringing officials from the two countries together more regularly. In addition, Azam said UNHCR plans to intensify their public information efforts vis-a-vis the Nicla refugees and said he had agreed with UNHCR Monrovia to support a high-level visit of a Liberian official to Nicla.

Comment

¶14. (U) UNHCR originally hoped that by downplaying U.S. resettlement for Liberian refugees they would be able to promote return to Liberia. The PRM statement announcing the end of group resettlement and establishing a deadline for the submission of affidavits of relationship for family reunion, or P-3 cases, seems to have helped them achieve that objective for the most part. However, in terms of promoting repatriation from specific camps, such as Nicla, UNHCR's strategy does not seem to have made much difference in generating return numbers. In fact, overall return figures from Cote d'Ivoire this year (1,800) are significantly lower when compared to last year (13,498), although much of that might be seasonal. Azam told RefCoord he would support an OPE visit (implementing NGO partner) in the near future to help clear out pending resettlement cases, suggesting that any interviewing be conducted in Abidjan. RefCoord believes this approach might help separate out refugees in Nicla from those with no chance for resettlement and could reinforce UNHCR's message that camp-based services are ending, thus promoting return as a viable option. OPE should consult closely, and early on, with UNHCR and brief UNHCR staff in Abidjan on numbers remaining as well as administrative

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procedures tied to the P-3 process so UNHCR can also better inform refugees as they move forward.
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